

Wise Sanitarium No. 2 (Plains Convalescent Home)  
North side of Hospital Street  
0.2 miles east of Bond Street  
Plains  
Sumter County  
Georgia

HABS No. GA-2213

HABS  
GA,  
131-PLAIN,  
22-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WISE SANITARIUM No. 2  
(Plains Convalescent Home)

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GA,  
131- PLAIN  
22.

Location: North side of Hospital Street, 0.2 miles east of Bond Street, Plains, Sumter County, Georgia.

USGS Plains Georgia Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator  
Coordinates: Zone 16, E 746400 N 3959460.

Present Owner: Plains Convalescent Home Inc.

Present Occupant/Use: Plains Nursing Center is a 100-bed nursing facility.

Significance: Jimmy Carter was born in the Wise Sanitarium October 1, 1924. At that time in Plains, most babies were born at home, but Jimmy's mother, Lillian Carter (1898-1983), was a nurse at the hospital, and there happened to be an available room the night of his birth. Lillian Carter received much of her nursing training at this facility and worked there throughout most of Jimmy's childhood. The hospital is also significant as one of the first small hospitals in Georgia to be accredited by the American College of Surgeons and the American Medical and Hospital Association. Architecturally, its Greek Revival styling ranks it as one of the most formally designed structures in Plains.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1917-21.
2. Architect: Original architect is Stephen Ralph Fetner<sup>1</sup>; 1978 additions by Hugh Gaston. Fetner (1905-78) graduated with a degree in architecture from the Georgia School of Technology in 1915 and became a member of the Jacksonville, Florida Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1936. Most of his commissions were in Georgia and Florida, the Wise Sanitarium being one of his earliest designs.<sup>2</sup>

Hugh Gaston was born in Gastonburg, Alabama, in 1924 and was educated at Auburn University. A member of the Georgia chapter of the American Institute of Architects, most of Gaston's buildings are

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Dixon, "Research Report on the Structures...", 1985, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> American Architect's Directory, p. 210.

located in Georgia.<sup>3</sup> Gaston also designed the Carter's house on Woodland Drive in 1961, and the Pond House in 1967. In the 1980s, Gaston dropped out of the public scene and moved to Lebanon, Tennessee.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is a chain of title to the land on which the structure stands. Deed book references are from the Clerk's Office, Sumter County Courthouse, Americus, Georgia.  
  
1920 Deed May 7, 1920, Deed Book VV, page 377. J.P. Wise sold six acres to the Wise Sanitarium for \$2,000.  
  
1956 Deed December 29, 1956, Deed Book 55, page 79. E.J. Wise, president, and J.E. Carter, secretary, of the Wise Hospital sold the property to E.W. Barber of Taliaferro, Georgia, for \$2,300.  
  
1957 Deed December 2, 1957, Deed Book 57, page 463. E.W. Barber sold the property to the Plains Convalescent Home Inc. for \$50,000. The sale included hospital beds and bedding, furniture, medicines, maintenance equipment, air-conditioning and heating equipment, office equipment and a fire-alarm system.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Ralph Wiggins was the general engineer at the hospital from 1962-82 and oversaw all changes made to the building between those dates.
5. Original plans and construction: A photograph of the east porch of structure taken in the 1920s reveals that the porch originally had full-height Ionic columns rather than piers on pedestals. A plan drawn by Hugh Gaston (dated October 6, 1977) shows the large addition and improvements made in 1978.
6. Alterations and additions: Since its construction in 1921, the structure has been extensively renovated and expanded. The building suffered an explosion in 1936 and was abandoned by the Wise brothers. E.W. Barber purchased it in 1956 for \$2,300, and sold it less than a year later for \$50,000; at this rate of appreciation, it can be assumed the building was repaired and improved drastically during this time. The addition of a fire-alarm system, air-conditioning and heating equipment are listed in the deed. In 1960 the building was remodeled; the original kitchen restored and the capacity increased from fifty to seventy-three patients.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> American Architect's Directory, p. 240.

<sup>4</sup> "History of Plains Convalescent Home," p. 1.

Glenn and Denise Godwin, who currently manage the home, said a sprinkler system was installed in 1967 and in 1974-75 the front portico was bricked in to form an office.<sup>5</sup> The porch on the west side was enclosed to form a sitting room. The south/front facade once featured a gabled portico over the central entrance that was removed when two offices were added to each side of the main entrance in 1974-75. The northernmost two bays of the thirteen-bay west facade once served as a covered ambulance entrance, which has since been walled in. Also, the tile roof was removed and replaced with shingles in the mid-1970s.<sup>6</sup> The most noticeable alterations were in 1978 when Hugh Gaston renovated the kitchen, knocked down walls, expanded hallways in the existing structure, and designed a fifty-two-bed addition that was made to the rear. A 1970s photograph shows that the last two bays on either end of the south facade originally had three bays, but now only have two; in 1978 the middle windows were filled in when the seven-bed rooms at the end were converted into two three-bed rooms to fulfill a state health requirement.

- B. Historical Context: The Wise Sanitarium was founded by three brothers from one of Plains' prominent families. Dr. Burr Thaddeus Wise (1882-1950), son of Plains' first mayor, Burr Thomas Wise, was the first of the brothers to become a doctor. Upon graduating from medical school at Tulane University in 1908, he began to practice in Plains with a case of supplies and a folding operating table. In 1911, his brother, Sam (1884-1943), also earned his medical degree at Tulane and, in 1912, the two men established the first hospital in Plains on the second floor of the Plains Pharmacy; it could accommodate ten to fifteen patients. In 1914, the youngest brother, Bowman J. (1888-1951), returned home from Tulane with a medical degree and joined his brothers, creating the threesome that would come to be known as the Three Wise Men. In 1916, the brothers moved from the office over the pharmacy to the second floor of a building on Main Street (see HABS No. GA-2216). The second story of the building was destroyed in a fire during the time that the current structure was under construction.

The construction of the \$75,000 hospital was a community effort and a great source of local pride.<sup>7</sup> Much of the wood structure came from the Wise farm in Plains.<sup>8</sup> Jimmy Carter's father, James Earl Carter Sr., was on the hospital's board of directors, and soon after James Earl Jr. was born at the

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<sup>5</sup> Denise and Glenn Godwin, 1989 interview.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Wiggins, 1989 interview.

<sup>7</sup> The Americus Times Recorder, Jan. 24, 1936.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn and Denise Godwin, 1989 interview.

hospital in October 1924, he became the proud owner of several shares of Wise Hospital stock.<sup>9</sup> The new facility for sixty patients featured an X-ray, an operating room with skylights, and a radium department. The only other radium obtainable in the area was in Atlanta, so black and white patients with cancer came from miles around for treatment.<sup>10</sup> A security deed for \$5,000, taken out on June 10, 1922, describes a "large brick hospital for white people and a smaller hospital for negroes."<sup>11</sup> In 1931, the Americus Times Recorder reported "Wise Sanatorium (sic) is also a great asset to Plains and the surrounding territory, providing expert medical and surgical attention for those needing the facilities of a hospital."<sup>12</sup> Ailing people reputedly came long distances to see the Wise doctors. So many that a hotel was built on the lot where the Phillips 66 Service Station that was formerly Billy Carter's now stands.

From 1917-34, the Wise Sanitarium was an accredited school for nurses with Lillian Carter among its alumnae. From 1921-23 she did her training in Plains, and after finishing her intern work at the Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Carter returned to Plains and nursed throughout most of Jimmy Carter's childhood. It was because of her professional affiliation with the facility that Jimmy Carter has the distinction of being the first president to have been born in a hospital. The doctors had a tradition of delivering the babies of the nurses at the hospital if there was a room available, which there was the night of Jimmy's birth. Lillian Carter claimed he was born in a small room on the west side of the west wing, although Dr. Sam Wise, who delivered the child, claims he was born in the delivery room, which was in the east wing. Nevertheless, the room on the west wing has been preserved intact despite the renovations made on the structure.

As a child, Jimmy remembers often leaving the Plains School at noon and walking the short distance to the sanatorium to join his mother for lunch, where "they always had grape juice."<sup>13</sup> He also remembered growing up among nurses and doctors, and the many times his mother would entertain them at his boyhood home.

January 21, 1936, disaster struck the hospital when a fire ignited in the boiler under the kitchen. Glenn Godwin said that when the fire swept through the area where the doctors stored organs and body parts, the formaldehyde used for preservation caused a huge explosion. The Americus Times Recorder reported that no one was injured in the blaze, although thirteen patients had to

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<sup>9</sup> Jimmy Carter, 1988 interview.

<sup>10</sup> "Medical History of Drs. Wise Brothers," p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Deed Book YY, p. 267.

<sup>12</sup> Americus Times Recorder, Dec. 8, 1931.

<sup>13</sup> Jimmy Carter, 1988 interview.

be carried from the hospital. A valuable supply of radium and other equipment were also removed from the burning structure; damages were estimated at a few thousand dollars. The interior, which had been recently repaired and redecorated, was damaged by water and smoke although the fire was confined to the kitchen and dining rooms.<sup>14</sup> A virtual hole was left where the kitchen had been and rather than repair the building, the brothers Thaddeus and Sam moved to Americus to open a clinic there, causing a great deal of resentment among the people of Plains.<sup>15</sup> Bowman split off from his brothers at this point and continued to practice in Plains.

Between 1936 and 1956, the Wise Sanitarium remained vacant, serving for a short time as temporary housing for dependents of soldiers during World War II. On December 29, 1956, E.W. Barber of Sharon, Georgia, purchased the gutted structure for \$2,300. The deed of sale includes the signatures of E.J. Wise as the president and J.E. Carter as the secretary. Several days later, an article in the Americus Times Recorder announced the purchase, and stated that the late doctors had still owned fifty-one percent of the stock in the building and the rest was owned by Plains citizens. The article also stated that Barber, who had been running a convalescent home in Washington, Georgia, planned to invest \$35,000 in the forty-seven-patient structure to create a modern convalescent home.<sup>16</sup> The long-awaited purchase was greeted enthusiastically in Plains, and the mayor requested everyone at the city council meeting of July 11, 1957 to attend the grand opening scheduled for the following day.<sup>17</sup>

Barber did as he had promised and increased the value of the property more than twentyfold, selling it less than a year later for \$50,000. The deed of sale included the new fire alarm system and air-conditioning and heating systems, as well as furniture, linens, medicines, office equipment, and other convalescent-care accoutrements. Barber sold the hospital, due to failing health, to a three-member corporation known as the Plains Convalescent Home Inc., which continues to own the property today. The new owners, one from Atlanta and the other two from New York City, were described as having "wide backgrounds in the field of gerontology," and their purchase as perhaps "a stepping stone in the establishment of at least a half a dozen new nursing homes throughout the state."<sup>18</sup> S.H. Greenwald served as the administrator of the home until his retirement in 1958, when he was replaced by L.E. Godwin, Jr. and his wife, Dorothy, director of nursing. Godwin's son, Glenn, now runs

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<sup>14</sup> Americus Times Recorder, Jan. 24, 1936.

<sup>15</sup> Jimmy Carter, 1988 interview.

<sup>16</sup> Americus Times Recorder, Jan. 7, 1957.

<sup>17</sup> Minutes, Plains City Council, July 11, 1957.

<sup>18</sup> Americus Times Recorder, Dec. 4, 1957.

the facility with his wife, Denise.

Increased demand for space, as well as stricter state codes for nursing homes, made expansion and renovation necessary in 1960 and again in 1978. The Plains Nursing Home (which leases the building from the Plains Convalescent Home Inc.) is filled to its 100-bed capacity, but with increasingly strict state requirements for nursing homes, the fate of the structure is not assured. Currently, however, its owners are attempting either to sell the structure or renovate it to meet state nursing home regulations. The building codes that will go into effect in 1991 require larger rooms and more window space per room, standards that will be impossible to meet in the original structure without great cost and without severely changing the appearance of the structure. The expansion of the 1978 addition and the conversion of the original building into a personal-care home (for which state standards are more lenient) is one solution being explored.<sup>19</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The one-story structure is utilitarian with Italianate and Classical Revival influence, such as a red terra cotta roof and Ionic porticos.
2. Condition of fabric: The historical portion is in fair condition; the 1978 wing, very good to excellent.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The original E-plan structure consisted of a one-story, twenty-one bay (two bays have since been removed) core running from east to west approximately 220'. Two perpendicular wings are attached to each terminus; the east wing seven bays and the west wing thirteen. An extension behind the center of the main block housed the kitchen. Directly behind the kitchen is a recreation and dining area connected to a modern fifteen-bay fifty-two-bed addition that runs 233' feet, east to west parallel to the main block. A hall leads from the main block, along the east wall of the original kitchen to the addition.
2. Foundations: The original structure is brick laid in Flemish bond with flush mortar joints and a soldier course at the ground level and watertable. Foundations on newer sections, such as the closed-in porch on the west wing, the addition to the rear of the west wing, and the

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis Harrison, 1989 interview.

added offices on each side of the front door are brick laid in common bond with a soldier course at the watertable. The fifty-two-bed wing has a one-course concrete-block foundation.

3. Walls: The original building is constructed of 8" x 12" hollow terra-cotta bricks faced with stucco. The enclosed porch and ambulance entrance on the west wing, offices on the south facade, and fifty-two-bed addition are constructed of stack bonded concrete block.
4. Structural system, framing: Load-bearing terra-cotta and concrete brick. The roof is supported by rough-sawn lumber, much of which is still charred from the 1936 fire. The bracing of the roof was insufficient to support the original heavy terra-cotta roof tiles which were removed in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup>
5. Porches, stoops: The original hospital had two large projecting porches at each terminus of the main block. The porch on the west end has been enclosed and now serves as a sitting room; the east side remains largely original, with the exception of concrete ramps added for wheelchair access. On both, the two-bay porch area features a heavy denticulated entablature; over the south halves of the porches are recessed, blank pediments with dentil moldings. On the east porch, the entablature is supported by piers, two in the center and three at the corners. A 1920s photograph shows that the entablature was originally supported by full-height Ionic columns in the same configuration. A 1960s photograph reveals that the columns were replaced by wood piers with Ionic capitals atop yellow brick pedestals during the renovations undertaken by E.W. Barber. The supports now consist of wood piers with Tuscan capitals atop red brick pedestals. Three wood engaged Ionic columns which would have matched the original supports remain on the facade of the building under the porch, further delineating the two bays of the porch. Although the west porch has been enclosed and the Ionic piers removed, one of these engaged columns still stands in the center of the wall of the sitting room. The entrances were originally located in the south bays under the pediments. On the east porch, the entrance has been moved to the right so it is now under the flat-roofed portion. Also, the original concrete steps led up to the south bay, but have now been removed and a ramp running north and doubling back south has been added for wheelchair access. The entrance to the enclosed west porch is located under the pediment, while a large triple window fills the north bay. The roof and upper walls are narrow tongue-and-groove boards painted green. The original upper roof and walls remain in the enclosed west

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<sup>20</sup> Glenn Godwin, 1989 interview.



porch.

The main entrance originally had a small one-bay porch which was a scaled down version of the side porches. The entire porch has been enclosed with only the entablature and pediment remaining the same. A long carpeted ramp under a flat canopy now leads up to the front entrance.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The original doors in the central entrance and the side porches have been removed. Wide metal doors for wheelchair access have been added to the outer door of the enclosed west porch, as well as the entrance under the porch on the east side. Modern double doors form the central main entrance. The original main entry still remains in part on the interior, between the front offices. The double-door opening is topped by a single rectangular transom light and flanked by three sidelights. A 1960s photograph reveals that the entrance under the west porch was identical to the main entry, as was probably the entrance on the east porch. Several industrial-type doors open into the rear of the structure: one near the juncture of the east wing with the central block, one at the juncture of the west side of the kitchen with the central block, two on the west side of the kitchen, and another at the juncture of the west wing with the central block. Recessed doors are located at both ends of the 1978 addition, and another is located at the juncture of the addition with the extension of the kitchen wing. Two additional subterranean doors lead to the basement rooms.
- b. Windows and shutters: The glazing throughout the original block consists of one-over-one-light single-hung sash with brick header lug sills. The original facade had twenty such windows, but the two center windows in the projecting wings on each end have been covered over. Also, the windows on each side of the main entrance became interior windows when the front portico was bricked in and offices added. These two side offices each have one south-facing window that matches those on the main facade.  
On the enclosed porch on the west end, a block of six awning windows face west and large double windows face north and south and allow light into this room. Modern six-light fixed windows (one facing east and the other west) glaze the enclosed ambulance-entrance area. Six modern four-light windows face west from the central kitchen wing (which is now used as a recreation area). A long hall to the 1978 addition was added along the east side of this wing, covering over four original

windows; the outlines of which are evident on the east interior wall of the kitchen. One full-height double window allows light into the hallway.

The 1978 addition has seven sets of paired windows and one single window across the north facade. The windows are tall one-over-one fixed metal sash that reach from almost the floor to the ceiling of the rooms. There are also several ground-level windows opening to the two basement rooms in the original structure. The original operating room had two skylights that have since been covered.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A shallow-pitch cross-hipped roof with three gables covers the original structure. Projecting gable roofs extend over the south bays of the porches, their ends forming pediments over the south halves of the porch areas; flat roofs cover the north bays of the porches. The roof was originally clad with hollow red terra-cotta tile removed in the 1970s and replaced with asphalt shingles. A shallow hipped roof covered with asphalt shingles also covers the 1978 addition.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The deep, closed cornices of the original structure have delicate decorative brackets generally spaced in pairs between every bay.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There are two basement rooms, one beneath the rear of the east wing, which was originally an operating room; another is beneath the kitchen. The former is now used for laundry and the latter is used for storage. A large boiler beneath the kitchen exploded in 1936.
- b. First floor: A long, wide corridor runs the length of the main block with single rooms on either side. Each room has one-door access to the hall, and one window. Two three-bed rooms are located on the south side of the hall in the projecting ends of the side wings. These were originally seven-bed rooms that were divided by a wall running north to south. At the east end of the hall in the main block is an open porch; on the west is an enclosed sun room. Additional rooms are located on either side of the hall running the length of the west wing, including the

room where Jimmy Carter was allegedly born, which has been preserved largely in its original form.

The corridor in the east wing is somewhat shorter and includes more two-bed rooms. The operating and recovery rooms were located in this wing at the back. The hall leading from the main entrance to the kitchen intersects the east-west running hall of the main block. At the north end of this hall is the dining and recreation room. At this junction a short corridor leading east meets another north-south running hall, which leads to the fifty-two-bed wing along the east side of the original kitchen. This narrow corridor inclines down toward the north and intersects with another east-to-west running corridor extending the length of the 1978 addition. Along it are twenty-nine semiprivate rooms, each with two beds separated by a curtain. Each room has one window and one door leading to the hall.

2. Flooring: The flooring throughout the original building is wood. Linoleum has been placed over the floor, which sags in places due to termite damage. The newer blocks have concrete floors covered with tile.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls in the original building are 2 x 4 stud walls of 2" thick wire lath and plaster. Originally, the rooms were tiled up to about 4'. This original tile remains in a few of the north rooms in the east and west wings.
4. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The original block features doors to patient rooms with large transom windows. Doors in the 1978 wing are modern flush and are wider for wheelchair access.
  - b. Windows: A nurse's station at the juncture of the 1978 wing and the connecting hall is glazed all around.
5. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The original structure had a small boiler in the basement beneath the operating room on the east wing and a large boiler underneath the kitchen. The 1978 addition features air-conditioning and heating units in each room.
  - b. Lighting: Electric.
  - c. Plumbing: Semiprivate rooms are designed with a shared

bathroom with a toilet and sink. A sprinkler system was added in 1957.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The hospital faces south and is set back about 150' from Hospital Street. A large lawn with a few scattered pecan trees creates an open, serene setting. West of the 1978 wing an area has been enclosed by a fence so patients can sit outside. Several benches and a wishing well are within this enclosure. Parking lots are located along the east and west sides of the building. The areas between the wings are used for loading and delivery.
2. Outbuildings: There is one standing-seam metal barn at the north end of the property. The front-facing gable structure is used for storage.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings: None for the original structure have been located; drawings for the 1978 addition by architect Hugh Gaston are located at Andersonville National Cemetery, Andersonville, Georgia.

B. Early Views:

1920s photograph. "Vanishing Georgia Collection," State Archives, Atlanta, Ga.

1960s photograph postcard, terra-cotta roof intact.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Conservation aerial photographs: 6-21-1937, hole in kitchen is apparent, front facing gable structure on the back of the lot (colored hospital); 3-25-1948, roof has been torn off kitchen, structure in back remains; 3-28-1953, no change in hospital, outbuilding is gone; 10-24-1962 renovation complete, trees and shrubs appear neat, driveways delineated with two roads leading to Hospital Street.

C. Interviews:

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, videotaped interview by Ed Bearss, National Park Service May 1988, Plains, Georgia. Andersonville, Ga.

Glenn and Denise Godwin, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, June 26, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

Harrison, Lewis Glenn Jr., architect, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, June 27, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

Ralph Wiggins, interview by Elizabeth Barthold, August 23, 1989, Plains, Georgia.

D. Bibliography:

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"Fire Menaces Hospital at Plains: Patients Unharmed." The Americus Times Recorder, January 24, 1936.

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"Plains Convalescent Home is Sold to Trio." The Americus Times Recorder, December 4, 1957.

Ward, Gene. "Plains...Wise Place." The Albany Sunday Herald, February 27, 1977.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold  
Project Historian  
National Park Service  
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